

On Meaning

The search for the meaning of a word often leads to the doorstep of a dictionary. But what if you are looking for the definition of 'meaning'? Trying to find the meaning of meaning in a book full of meanings may not be the wisest step, but a dictionary is where I began. According to my dog-eared copy of Webster's Seventh New Collegiate, a book that I was given for my Bar Mitzvah many, many years ago, 'meaning' has several definitions, one of which is "the thing that is conveyed, especially by language."

The thing that is conveyed, especially by language. Conveyed is a lovely word, and conjures up in my mind images of something being carried. I looked up the meaning of the word convey, for as you know, one definition begets another. Convey, according to my trusty dictionary, has several meanings, one of which is "to bear from one place to another." I put my dictionary down and resisted the temptation to define "bear". But it, too, is a lovely phrase: *to bear from one place to another.*

Now I found myself with two parts in my search for the meaning of meaning: a "thing" that is conveyed, and the place to which it is carried. A thing and a place. These two factors give rise to three questions: *What* is the thing being carried? *Who* is carrying it? *Where* are they carrying it to?

When you ask yourself, as I have, "What does it mean to be Jewish?", the "thing" is Judaism. Judaism is being conveyed; Judaism is being borne from one place to another. In my journey, in my on-going struggle to define what it means to be a Jew today I have stumbled and tripped over countless potholes. The fact is, we can all agree that Judaism is what is being carried from the past, through the present, and into the future. But whose Judaism? Most of us here today have a different definition of Judaism than a Lubavitcher. You will not see a Lubavitcher sitting amongst us today for the same reason you have not chosen to sit among Lubavitchers. I'm willing to wager that for most of us here, the Lubavitcher service is not one we would find meaningful. We might find it interesting, challenging, certainly different, but conclude that it doesn't speak to us. As for what the Lubavitcher would think of this service, held in a church, women side by side with men. Don't ask.

So we are here today and not somewhere else because we believe that gathering as this community is more meaningful than being at another service that may not mesh with who we are. We all have our reasons for being here and not there. And what binds us is a common system of beliefs, beliefs we have spelled out in what we call Our Vision. And if you take the time to read our Vision - it's mercifully short - you will read the beliefs "which define us and unite us". There's that word again. Define. And that is what we have tried to do: define who we are as a community. But I can assure you that Our Vision has not been inscribed in stone. After we wrote our original vision, one of our members pointed out that we purported to be inclusive but failed to mention same-sex couples. So we discussed and debated where to draw the line of inclusivity — as we mention, we cannot be everything to everyone — and decided it was an oversight not to include same-sex couples when we claimed to represent a wide spectrum of individuals and families. The change may not mean much to many of you, but it is sure to strike a chord with some.

So our vision has not been inscribed so much as it has been moulded. We prefer working with the clay of tradition rather than immoveable stones. But much as you can rework clay it is still clay. Certain fundamentals we hold dear to our collective heart: the importance of history, traditions, holidays, ethics, culture, spirituality, children, family and community. It is unimaginable to foresee the day when we abandon our traditions or turn our back on our children. We speak about beliefs which define and unite us as a community. In other words, to a greater or lesser extent we are a collection of shared visions.

But if all of us here today were to stand before the same mountain each of us would see it from a different perspective. Each of us has our own particular vision. It may be a vision refracted by years of self-questioning, a vision splintered by healthy skepticism, a vision made sharp by hard-won experience. Even the absence of a vision is a vision. We all have our own vision, and I would ask as you sit here today — here and not somewhere else — what is your vision?

It is a question I have pondered and pulled apart and tried to put back together again: what is My Vision? How would I define myself as a Jew? How can I make Judaism meaningful? Because the stakes are high. They are even higher if you have children. And higher still if your children are being raised in an interfaith household, as mine are.

Many of us speak of a cultural Judaism, of the foods and holidays and stories that have shaped us. Jewish food, Jewish humour, Jewish traditions: all are woven into the melody of childhood that echoes throughout our lives. The primacy of education, the love of learning: these are but some of the cultural assumptions we absorb without even knowing it.

But is it enough? Is it enough to savour the food, to appreciate the sensibility, to sing the songs? For many of us, it is all that we need. Cultural Judaism is a touchstone we can return to, a solid place that keeps us moored when we feel the need to be anchored, a strong sense of belonging that cannot often be articulated but is felt in the marrow. I call it the Catskill Syndrome: you smile a smile of recognition when you hear a thick Yiddish accent; your nose dances when the smells of Jewish cooking embrace you like a shawl. There is something to be said for how fortifying the familiar can be.

For others, a minority within a minority, even cultural Judaism is too much. Not for them the holidays, the traditions, another helping of tsimmes. For them, Judaism is odourless; it has no fragrance. They are not hostile toward their heritage, but merely indifferent. They have their reasons and their explanations, and their stories deserve to be heard if we are to try and understand why the same tune that can lift one person's heart can fall flat on another's ears.

For the most part, I would describe myself as a cultural Jew. I, too, know and appreciate the unspoken bond that comes when you meet someone who also knows the vocabulary of cultural Judaism, a shorthand where so much can be understood without saying a word. I have a friend who grew up in Winnipeg, who I only met in my mid-thirties, and every time we get together I have to remind myself that we didn't go to the same camp

outside Montreal, that I haven't known him all my life. But it feels as if I have, and that feeling, that connection, is not something I can explain or define.

But lately, I've been wondering if that feeling is enough. Is it enough to spend the rest of my life wading through the waters of cultural Judaism, or is time I dipped my toes into the waters of religion? Because I have to tell you, I know those waters are deep and once you dive in there's no telling what you will find. Maybe it was turning forty this year, and the proverbial mid-life crisis led me to wonder if there is not something greater at work, some larger force that doesn't orchestrate life but waits to be discovered if you care to look for it. Maybe I'm getting a head start on all the eighty-year olds out there who sailed through life but now face the Big Questions, like "What does it all mean?" I've decided I don't want to wait until I'm eighty to try and figure it all out. Why spend the final years of your life grappling with difficult, searing questions when you can spend four decades tying yourself into knots?

So my vision - as one individual in a group of collective visions - includes God. Truth be told, I get a little nervous speaking about God. It's this fear of being lumped together with some slick, Sunday morning televangelist who preaches that the road to salvation is only a 1-800 number away. Talk of God evokes images of religious fundamentalists of all stripes, extremists I want nothing to do with. I want nothing to do with holy rollers. Nor do I want to embrace Hasidism.

What I do want is to my expand my definition of who I am as a Jew to include God. And that's not easy, because I have difficulty reconciling the idea of a greater force at work with some difficult and hard truths. I am not the first to collide with these truths, nor will I be the last. The truth is, six million Jews perished in the Holocaust, as did millions of others with their own set of beliefs and values. Where was God? The truth is, countless numbers of children die each year of malnutrition while countless more live in a world of excessive consumption, trying to lose weight. When will God appear to right these wrongs? At this very moment, a veil of unspeakable sorrow is draped over every corner of the earth. I keep waiting for the flood to end all floods. Surely it is just a matter of time before a torrent is unleashed and we are given another chance to start anew. God knows we've done a pretty bad job thus far. What is God waiting for?

I don't have the answers. And I take comfort knowing I'm not expected to. In a recent Shabbat letter that I receive on-line, Rabbi Rick Sherwin defines what it means to be Jewish. He provides several meanings, of course, the first of which is "Being Jewish means that we must continue to seek, never thinking that we have reached the end and the conclusion." And so time is on my side. I'm prepared to take a lifetime to try and understand what it means to be Jewish and have a relationship with God. And I might give new meaning to the word "religious" along the way, redefining my sense of Judaism as I explore a personal relationship with God. In other words, I might be a religious Jew already and not even know it. There are several definitions for "religious" in my trusty dictionary, including: "relating or devoted to the divine or that which is held to be of ultimate importance." Perhaps you are religious too, whether you are Jewish or sharing your life with someone who is, or have a different faith of your own. The truth is, we are here today, all of us, participating in a gathering where we are worshipping God. Does that mean we all believe in God? Of course not. Does it mean we are hypocrites if we

don't believe in God but go through the motions anyway, reciting prayers and singing songs as if we were taking a paint-by-numbers approach to the High Holidays?

No. What it means is we are drawn here for our own personal reasons, each of us drawing something different from today's service, from the prayers, from the readings, from the texts, drawing something we hold to be of ultimate importance. In the prayer book that was created for our monthly Shabbat services, there is Sh'ma, the Communal Declaration of Faith.

*Shema Yisrael: Adonai Eloheinu
Adonai echad!
Baruch sheim ke-vod
malchuto leolam vaed*

*Hear, O Israel -
The divine abounds everywhere
and dwells in everything;
the many are one.*

Above the Sh'ma is an explanation that reads: "We call out the Sh'ma in order to remind ourselves that even though we may each have a different connection to God, and our picture may be different from each other's, we are all connected to the same Source." Surely each of us has some kind of spiritual need that has brought us together today. The need to connect with other like-minded people is a spiritual need. When we talk of spirituality, let us not be afraid to talk about God. We needn't arrive at any conclusions, nor should we. We need not agree on *the* truth, but *a* truth. We could begin by talking of moments that have touched our very core. We all have had those moments, moments when we are reminded what it means to be alive on this small, fragile planet of ours. Anyone who has experienced watching a child being born will know of what I speak. But there are other, subtler moments that speak to us and that might possibly speak of God speaking to us. At these Shabbat services that our held in neighbourhood homes, we begin by holding hands and singing a song with but one word: Shalom. You should know that if I had to predict the possibility that I would attend Shabbat services on a monthly basis, I would have given it a 3.2 on the Richter scale of improbability. But there I am, month after month after month, standing in a living room, holding hands in a circle where there are some familiar faces and usually a few welcome new ones. And as we sing this one word song in unison I can literally feel a current run through me. I can't explain it, nor would I care to. But I can't help but feel that this spiritually charged moment has something to do with something much larger than this small circle of people gathered on a Friday night, that it is profoundly connected to my sense of Judaism, my sense of God.

As I said, the waters of religion run deep. If a Friday night Shabbat service has given me a glimpse of God, perhaps studying the Torah would give me an even better view. The truth is, I know precious little about the Torah, and I suspect many of you could keep me company on that score. But I like to think it's not too late to begin to explore the riches of Judaism and apply it to my everyday life. Because the idea of divorcing the meaning of Judaism from daily life doesn't interest me. I have always believed that one of the

essentials of Judaism has been to side with those who wear the wounds of this wounded world in which we live. And so it makes my heart swell to see members of this community volunteer to help serve hot meals at the Out of the Cold program that is run out of this church every winter. A band-aid solution? Yes, but band-aids have to be applied in the short-term as we work towards long-term answers.

It was in this church where we held a gathering last spring in which two women spoke of their spiritual journeys from one faith to another. One was born an Anglican and is now a Jew. The other was born a Jew and is now a member of the United Church. Their stories were powerful, but no less powerful was a moment that happened during a discussion afterwards. A woman spoke of deciding at the age of fourteen that the faith she was born into was not meeting her spiritual needs, and that she wanted to become Jewish. It took her many, many years to find a place where she felt comfortable, and I'm delighted to say she found it right here, amongst us. I don't mention this as a plug for the Danforth Jewish Circle. I bring it up because of the three questions I mentioned at the beginning: *What* is the thing being carried? *Who* is carrying it? *Where* are they carrying it to?

Who can carry Judaism? I take great pride in being a member of a community that opens its doors to anyone who shares the beliefs that define and unite us. Read our vision and you will note that "all of us are committed to nurturing Jewish life." And so I believe that Judaism can be carried by anyone who has made a commitment to Judaism. How you define commitment is up to you. The fact is, the carriers of Judaism, as it were, are not all Jewish. Not anymore. Many of the households in this community are interfaith households. Within those households you will find a wide spectrum of commitment to Judaism. Some partners have converted, others are supportive but chosen not to convert, others still didn't feel the need to convert because they had nothing to convert from, having distanced themselves from their own religion. Whatever the configuration, in many of the homes in which we live Jewish life has taken on a new meaning. Many of us are blessed to have partners who have recognized the role Judaism plays in our lives and who have given their heart and soul in supporting our spiritual needs. To reject these partners, these husbands and wives, these parents of our children, to reject them on the grounds that they are not Jewish would be unconscionable and a mistake of epic proportions. We must welcome Jews and the partners they have chosen to share their lives with, or we risk losing them forever.

Where are we carrying Judaism? You need only read the first line of the invitation that brought you here today. "With one hand we reach back to our traditions. With the other we reach forward to a renewed Judaism that reflects our diverse community." Make no mistake about it: Judaism will survive and thrive. In the many streams that are Judaism, a new one will emerge, peopled by children who were raised in interfaith households, more often than not with a strong sense of Jewish identity, coupled with a legacy from a parent not born into Judaism. My children are a case in point. Equal parts *shtetl* and Scottish highlands, I cannot predict what kind of Judaism they will practice as adults. Like so much else, the paths our children pursue are out of our hands. But certainly we can guide them in certain directions. I am committed to giving my two young daughters a Jewish identity. My wife is devoted to giving them an unshakeable sense of womanhood, of what it means to live an affirmative life in a world where women continue to be debased and devalued. And it occurred to me the other day that Jews and women have the dubious

distinction of having words to describe those who hate them. Definitions of 'misogynist' and 'anti-semite' can both be found in a dictionary. It is worth remembering that the Nazis who roamed the ghettos or the deranged man who recently walked into a Jewish community center in Los Angeles and shot five children didn't bother with definitions of what it means to be a Jew. When you look at the world through eyes clouded with hate, a Jew is a Jew is a Jew. And so however you choose to define what it means to be Jewish, it's a journey worth undertaking, for if you are going to be hated for being someone you should know in your heart who that someone is.

The future, as always, is in the small, unblemished hands of our children. Those of you don't have children should not make the mistake of believing you are childless. The fate of our children must be a collective responsibility. That is why we stated on our invitations that "a portion of every ticket supports our children's Jewish studies program." We didn't ask if you had children or if you wanted to support our children's school. We took it as a given. We believe that educating our children about Jewish life is of paramount importance, and we were confident you would share that belief. A few years ago, when the Danforth Jewish Circle was nothing more than a conversation amongst a dozen or so people gathered in a living room, the prevailing theme was the desire to give our children what we had known as children ourselves: a sense of Jewishness, a sense of community, a sense of belonging. As for my two children, they have been given two gifts: the legacy of a rich world called Judaism, and a lifetime to figure out what that means.

I am but one in a group of individuals who live in this neighbourhood and beyond who are committed to making Judaism meaningful and relevant. One way to make life more meaningful, whether you are raising a child or returning to religion, is to become more involved. Building a community like ours takes work. It takes action. But don't sell yourself short by thinking that if you can't lend countless hours toward building a community you have nothing to give at all. The smallest gesture can resonate. Light a candle on a Friday night and begin to explore with friends and family the significance of Jewish ritual. Spend two hours on a cold winter's night serving hot meals to the homeless. Answer your children's questions about God, and don't be afraid to unmask your fears, your doubts, the cuts and scrapes you've endured in your own search for meaning.

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